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review

Idyllic Greek and Honest Verse

DARYL HINE, *The Homeric Hymns and the Battle of the Frogs and Mice: A Translation*, Atheneum.

How do you get your readers to realize that the original of your translation was poetry? It is not easy. Charles Boer in his 1970 rendering of the *Homeric Hymns* used typography: he sprinkled one-to-five-word lines over the pages as if he had gotten his verse from a pepper mill. The editor of *Poetry* disdained the mechanical assists, and chose to write poetry.

He succeeded. I checked him against the Greek and found him accurate; I checked him against earlier translations and found him independent. I read Hine's English alone and found it poetic. I am impressed, nearly overwhelmed.

The book is fun to read, just like the original. Another aspect which it shares with the original is that you should not try to read it all at once. Treat it like a box of chocolates: consume only one or two a day. There is a ricliness here that will not bear gorging. You could get sick on the stuff.

It is the matter of the meter. Why is it that everyone attempting dactylic hexameter in English is so purely dactylic? It must be granted that much of the challenge of writing poetry is in submitting one's skill to a fixed form, but Daryl Hine has accepted more limitations than really were obligatory. The classical hexameter substituted spondees anywhere. The sixth foot had to be a spondee, of course, but the alternatives for the other five feet gave thirty-two mathematically possible variations on the hexameter line, twenty-five of which were used. But somehow in the English language there is only the one which Rolfe Humphries described

Bumpity bumpity bumpity bumpity bumpity bump-down.

This was, in fact, a favorite of Homer, but only fifteen percent of Homer's lines went like that. The remaining eighty-five percent substituted at least one spondee, usually in the first or second foot (Bump-bump bumpity bumpity bumpity bumpity bump-down, or Bumpity bump-bump bumpity bumpity bumpity bump-down). The completely dactylic line (which Hine uses exclusively) comprises only a fifth of the *Homeric Hymns*: there is a pleasing variety used and allowed in the original meter. It permits areas for liberty which Dr. Hine did not permit himself. Yet the Greek-reading reader can shift comfortably from the Greek meter to that of the English:

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in both, the feel is much the same. Hine, despite the risk of monotony which he imposes on himself, has produced a captivating verse translation.

The material is captivating, too. It provides a vision of Man and the Olympians, idyllic narratives and comic ones. Many, like that of Aphrodite obliged to submit to her own power and to Anchises, deserve to become part of everyone's general cultural background. The Hymns (with the Frogs and Mice) could justly become "required reading," and Hine's the translation of choice.

THOMAS N. WINTER

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